

Thinking in Values

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In contemporary thinking on values and in the hopes that some of us have in axiology, there is a kind of paradox. First of all, for many years now, especially here in Poland, interest in values has shown no sign of waning. It does not seem likely that this is by accident. Rather, it suggests that we have become aware of a crisis situation, one in which the certainty of what is basic has deserted us. We have lost our spontaneous faith in God, as well as our spontaneous belief in the permanence of our own human nature and the nature of things around us. On what, then, should we base our decisions? Values would seem to be a convenient basis, for they require neither faith in God nor the kind of knowledge involved in understanding human nature and the essence of things. Advocates of various worldviews, proceeding from their diverse standpoints, can give a compromising assent to values. For many skeptics, axiology is a constant recourse in the face of nihilism. For some Christians, it is a comfortable level of dia-

48 logue with those who have lost respect for technology and the power of matter released by it, but have not yet managed to arrive at faith in God. One hears, then: before we arrive at an understanding concerning God and the essence of things, let us at least agree that “truth always means truth, and justice, justice”.

At the same time, however, we observe an opposite phenomenon: a decided movement away from axiology, evident particularly in the West. This is reflected in assertions by the increasingly influential philosopher, Martin Heidegger. He writes, for example: “The bizarre effort to prove the objectivity of values does not know what it is doing. When one proclaims ‘God’ the altogether ‘highest value,’ this is a degradation of God’s essence. Here as elsewhere thinking in values is the greatest blasphemy imaginable against Being.”¹ Helmut Kuhn sums up the history of modern axiology in a familiar way.² Axiology, he says, reached its peak in Nietzsche. But Nietzsche, with his famous “transvaluation of values,” placed values under the control of the “will to power.” The concept of values thus became associated with subjectivism and nihilism. The efforts of Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann, and other phenomenologists were of no avail. The idea of an object is inseparable from that of a subject. The more we accentuate the objective aspect of values, the more the subject will resound. Axiology, rather than allowing us to get beyond the realm of the subject, will constantly emphasize subjectivity.

Some, then, see axiology as a defense against nihilism, while others see it as leading straight to nihilism. Why is this so? Some years ago, Roman Ingarden presented an important paper in Krakow entitled “What Don’t We Know About Values?” But then our intellectual situation was different. On the one hand, the radical questioning of axiology by proponents of thinking “in the truth of Being” had not yet penetrated our consciousness. On the other, the ever-present questioning by positivistic thought was something we did not take too seriously; we were sure that phenomenology would overcome positivism, although the positivists knew nothing of this. Consequently, today, in my opinion, we should formulate our problem differently, perhaps more fundamentally: Have we reached a point in our thinking to be able to dispense with thinking in values? Our question should focus on thinking. Many proponents of axiology believe that axiology has its subjective basis in the emotional sphere of the human being, because “reason is blind to values.” Is it really? Today, in the face of the type of questioning we find in Heidegger, we must search for the basis of axiology at the very heart of thinking, otherwise axiology will not fulfill the hopes that have arisen in this crisis situation. Is our thinking a thinking in values, and are we in a position to dispense with such thinking?

¹ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” *Basic Writings*, New York: Harper, 1977, p. 228.

² Helmut Kuhn, *Das Sein und das Gute*, Munich: Kösel, 1962.

The problem of values is usually viewed from two sides: from the side of the thing to which certain values “belong,” and from the side of the person who experiences values and thinks in values. We will first consider the matter from the side of the thing, and then from the side of the person. Our treatment will be very general. We will not get into the controversies over the precise meaning of the concepts involved, but simply try to capture what seems most evident.

We find ourselves at this moment in a lecture hall. There are here with us acquaintances and strangers, professors and colleagues, people more or less congenial to us. There are also objects, such as chairs, windows, doors, and microphones. Every person and every object requires appropriate recognition and behavior from us. In order to behave properly in this small world of ours, we must know how to “interpret values.” We do not greet chairs, and we do not look for a place to sit on the laps of those already seated. Barring necessity, we do not sit with our backs to the podium. Our present world is clearly a world of values, and we in it are creatures who interpret those values. What does this mean? Let us not bicker over the use of concepts but try to enter directly into the experience.

When we say that “our world is a world of values,” we see around us concrete matters and things. Perhaps even more “matters” than “things.” Someone was just now waiting for us because he had some “matter” to discuss with us. We were waiting for someone in order to tell her “something important.” Someone has fallen ill, and we need to buy medicine. Someone has died, and we need to go to the funeral. Someone is happy because he just got married. We look around “our” landscape: here we see someone’s home, there a forest full of attractions, further on a school, a church, and here a cemetery grove. We can multiply the descriptions and make them ever more dramatic and concrete. One thing, however, will constantly recur: the human world contains something that is good and something that is evil, and also something that is better, worse, and worst. Our world is — in a sense that is difficult to define more precisely — a hierarchically ordered world. Matters, objects, and people are arranged in it for us in a more or less stable hierarchical order. We do not know exactly what evil is or what good is. We do not know precisely where to draw the line between the one and the other. And yet we cannot avoid a certain hierarchy. Truth be told, on closer inspection, we never even try to do so. Our main concern in our world is to avoid the “evil” that presently threatens us and to attain the “good” that here and now is to be attained.

Could “our world” be a different world? At first glance, it seems that it could. A world devoid of values is not an intrinsically contradictory world. In the homogenous geometrical space that we are able to conceive, all forms and figures are equally important and equally unimportant. We can say that a rock is itself, a tree is itself, an animal is itself, a human being is itself. A being is a being, and every being has its own characteristics.

50 Among those characteristics, however, there is none that would be kindness or animosity, better or worse. Everything exists “on the same plane.” Nietzsche said: “Evil is a superstition of God — quoth the serpent.” We can say: “Evil is a superstition of human beings,” and so is good. Although an objectivistic view of the world is not self-contradictory, we know that a radically objectified world, a world devoid of values, is certainly not our world. In the world of “objects” there are figures, forms, and planes, and no one object is better than another. In our world, the world in which we are born and die, there is a home and homelessness; there is a place for work and a lack thereof; there is a school, a church, and also a cemetery, and all of this presents us with a dignity all its own. In this world there is also hunger and injustice, courage and death, important matters and those of less importance. If all of this were suddenly to become wholly indifferent to someone, we would ask with concern: What’s the matter with that person? In this question, the hierarchy returns to us.

We may also consider the problem of values from the side of the person. Again, we are not arguing about the precise meaning of words. We humans are constantly in motion. We pursue one thing and flee from another. We desire one thing and fear another. We entertain a particular hope and are threatened by some distress. We love one person and find ourselves unable to love another. We experience joy and affliction. We are thrown into the necessity of constantly “putting one thing before another,” the necessity of “preferring.” As Liebert said: “Having made a choice for ever, at every moment I must choose.”³ We do not know precisely how to define the rules that guide our preferences, but we live because we know how to prefer.

Can we imagine this being otherwise? Again, we encounter a paradox: there is nothing intrinsically contradictory in not preferring. Instead of putting one thing before another, instead of preferring, we can arrange things in succession: “first this, then that.” First I’ll eat dinner, then I’ll take a walk, and then I’ll read a book — all on one level. This sort of thinking makes me, in the words of Herbert Marcuse, a “one-dimensional person.” A one-dimensional person knows what things are good for and conforms his or her actions, expressions, and desires to this knowledge. Such an approach is also conceivable. At the same time, we treat the very idea of a “one-dimensional person” as an insult to our sense of dignity. We think: if this idea reflects the truth about me, then I am in a wretched state indeed. In fact, none of us wants to be a person of one dimension. And so our preferential mode of thinking is for us a guarantor of our authenticity and the basis of our human dignity.

It appears, then, that our world is a hierarchically ordered world and our thinking, a preferential thinking. But is this not all just a superstition? Let us emphasize yet again that such an assumption is not absurd. Nothing forces us to accept values. And if something does force us to, this

³ Jerzy Liebert (1904–1931) was a Polish poet who explored existential and religious themes. The line cited here is from his poem “The Horseman” (*Jeździec*). —Trans.

constraint is not the same as the constraint that prohibits us from thinking ⁵¹ of square circles or mountains without valleys. Our thinking in values contains a characteristic motif, the motif of freedom. No one needs to perceive values. No one needs to acknowledge them to the full. The higher the value, the greater the liberty of acknowledging it. A value seems to say to me: "If you wish, you may choose me." Everything is contained in this little "if you wish." Standing among values, nothing really constrains me. But precisely this, that "among values nothing constrains me," is itself a value — the value of freedom. The subject experiencing a value is a free subject. No doubt, the reason we find the world of values so appealing is that nothing in it is imposed on us by force. At the same time, because of values we have a vague feeling that if we do not accept this world we may fall victim to some kind of force.

These circumstances contribute to make values a constant source of fascination for human life and thought. Even Heidegger's "thinking of Being" does not seem to be exempt from this. The key concepts in Heidegger's philosophy have a distinctly axiological ring. What, for example, is "truth" in the formula "the truth of Being" if not some sort of human "good"? What is the "clearing of truth" if not the opposite of obscurity? And what is "resoluteness" if not the act of ultimate self-definition in a preference made in the face of death? What are the profound and beautiful symbols of "home," "homeland," and "shepherd of Being" by means of which Heidegger elucidates our relationship with existence?

If this is the case, then let us ask another question: What sort of experience is for us the ultimate source of all axiological experiences, including the experience of thinking? What sort of experience permits good and evil, value and antivalue, joy and despair to appear in our inner reality in such a way that we do not flee from them — although, theoretically speaking, such flight is always possible? It seems to me that this occurs particularly when we *encounter* another person. I emphasize the word "encounter." The experience of an encounter contains an unusual power of persuasion. An encounter is something more than an ordinary "coming in contact" with another, seeing or hearing another. An encounter is an Event. It initiates a drama the course of which cannot be foreseen. Here are some examples of encounters: On the road to Damascus, Saul encountered the One whom he persecuted. And, on another level, Raskolnikow encountered Sonia (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*), Leven encountered Kitty (Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina*), Anna encountered Vronsky (Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina*), and Frederic encountered Madame Arnoux (Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*). When I experience an encounter, I know with certainty that the other exists, that he is different, that he is transcendent. I also know something else: that he and I find ourselves in a realm of good and evil, value and antivalue. I can affect the other — harm him or make him happy. And he can do likewise. In this way, an encounter disposes me not only to preferential feeling but also to preferential thinking. Axiology springs from the very core of who I am.

To encounter is something more than and different from to see, to hear, or to shake hands. What does it mean to encounter? To encounter is to obtain an immediate sense of the tragedy permeating all the modes of being of another person. What is the tragic? Max Scheler illuminated this concept for us. The tragic occurs where some good, some value, can be destroyed by some evil, some antivalue. For the tragic to appear, this destruction need not actually take place. The very possibility of destruction, the very uncertainty of the outcome of the battle between good and evil, is something tragic. This is precisely how things stand with the other person. We do not know exactly what threatens the other. In order to describe the other's tragedy, we have recourse to metaphors, to symbols. In all of this, one thing seems constant: something in the other appeals for salvation. We encounter, therefore, when we obtain an immediate sense of that appeal and the sources from which it springs. The other seems to speak by his or her very presence: "If you wish, you can..." What can I? I don't know. What am I to wish? I don't know that either. I do know that I can wish or not wish. Nothing here happens by necessity. The other will always be able to say to me: "You came because *you* wanted to." Whatever happens, happens as a result of freedom, which will always believe that things could have been otherwise.

An encounter marks the beginning of a drama. The drama has a time and place of its own, as well as its own major and minor heroes. This implies that a drama has a hierarchy. Every encounter is threatened by separation, and in every separation lives the muted memory of the encounter. The impossibility of radically cutting ourselves off from one another is one of the sources of the tragedy that permeates human relations. This accounts for our tendency toward repeated encounters and repeated separations. There is nothing in an encounter as such, however, that requires it to end tragically. The horizon of the drama, even if it is open to the phenomenon of the tragic, contains many other possibilities as well, such as the possibility of the triumph of the good, the possibility of the ennoblement of the person, and also the possibility of comedy and farce. All the variations of the drama are possible, however, only where the interpersonal sphere has taken on a hierarchical character and preferentiality has penetrated to the very core of human thinking.

In an encounter, we always encounter *someone*. The someone encountered is given to us in the phenomenon of the tragic. What does this mean? Kant wrote: "Nothing in the world — indeed nothing even beyond the world — can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a *good will*."⁴ We do not know whether good and evil can be attributed to things, objects, vistas, or beings as beings. A variety

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959, 9.

of views exist on this topic, and our intuition of the good is not clear. And 53 yet, if the concept of the good is not just a hollow sound, this is because of the possibility that somewhere in the depths of the human soul there lives a speck of a truly good will. The human will is the only realm of reality given to us in which the presupposition of good is not in vain. Of course, we can also presuppose evil, and we even do presuppose it. The one is inseparable from the possibility of the other. That is why we perceive the tragic. That is why we hear: “If you wish, you can...”

This propels us “onto the path” of radical inner transformation—metanoia, conversion, reformation, or whatever one might call it. We are not exactly sure where this path will lead us. We have only a general sense of the goal. We know there exists a gulf between a person who kills the encountered life and one who cultivates it. To cultivate means “to let be.” In this phrase Marcel perceived a metaphysics of the human being. A human being is one who is able to “let be.” How do we go about “letting be”? An encounter is a moment in which we attain a vivid sense of the tragic in another person, and indirectly in ourselves as well (we will not take up this issue here). From the heart of the phenomenon of the tragic emerges the appeal: “If you wish, you can let be.” The point is not to dismiss the other with some word or action, with flight or insolence, but to incline existence toward kindness and kindness toward existence, toward perseverance. My deeds may be of various kinds: bandaging a wound, giving advice, offering bread and water. Each of these deeds, however, emerges from within the horizon of *sacrifice* that has opened up in me. At the sight of the tragic, there opens the possibility of sacrifice. What is a sacrifice? It is allowing my own good will to find expression — my will for another’s good. An act of sacrifice is the highest axiological experience of which a human being is capable.

Only if I have experienced an encounter can I say that I have authentically experienced concrete good and evil, the tragic, freedom, and the voice of the categorical imperative coming to me from another. Only if I have had an encounter can I sincerely sacrifice myself. Apart from an encounter, all of the other concepts mentioned above are concepts devoid of experience. Axiological experience tends toward a sacrifice of some kind. What kind? This, too, we do not know. The key to axiology is an encounter with another. Not until we encounter another do we see people living in a hierarchically organized world; not until then do we have preferences and understand the preferences of others. We let be. Others let us be. Not until we encounter another can the path to God open before us. Lévinas writes: “The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face....God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men.”⁵

This point needs some clarification.

A classic axiological text that has come down to us through the philosophical tradition (here I am not considering specifically religious

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969, 78.

54 texts) is the description of the human being in the cave, which we find in Plato's *Republic*. People chained to a wall of a cave see on the opposite wall the shadows of true reality, which lies concealed somewhere beyond them. Plato does not speak of objective values or valuable objects, and yet his description has a profoundly axiological character. Axiological experience in this sense is something unutterably simple and, at the same time, constructed upon nothing else. On the contrary, all other experiences are in some way constructed upon it. What does this experience reveal to us? It reveals the fact that the world in which we live *is not the kind of world that can and ought to be*. The primordial axiological experience does not tell us that something that does not exist ought to exist. It also does not tell us what we ought to do or not do. All of this appears later. At first, it tells us simply this: *something is that ought not be*. The visible world is an illusion of the world. Prometheus hangs nailed to a cliff, but why, what for? We all live in a cave of utter darkness. Why are we so confined? Why do the just suffer? Why did Socrates die the way he did? Originally, there is always this: that something is that ought not be. Why? This question has one simple source — the light flowing from the good. The good in Greek is called *agathon*. The experience we are attempting to describe is a radical agathological experience. This experience is also a radical metaphysical experience, because it prompts us to question existence; it teaches us to distinguish plenitude from incompleteness, existence from essence, form from matter, cause from effect.

Thus, we should distinguish two kinds of experience: agathological and axiological. The former is more fundamental. It reveals the “negative” side of all that surrounds us. It says to us: there is something that ought not be; the world is an illusion of the world. It also shows us the tragic in human existence. In this experience there is still no sense of obligation. I do not yet know what I ought to do, how I ought to do it, or whether I ought to do anything at all. Nevertheless, I already feel a sense of rebellion. At the beginning of thought is rebellion; rebellion is thought's first fault. In this rebellion there is already preference; there is already an embryonic view of hierarchy. Preference is a condition of the possibility of thought. Following agathological experience, or “upon” it, comes axiological experience, the core of which is: “If you wish to, you can...” Only then do I try to see what I should do, how I should behave, who I should save, what I should pursue, and what I should avoid. Agathological experience is primarily a revealing experience, whereas axiological experience is a projecting experience. Agathological experience concerns being in the light of the good; axiological experience concerns events in the light of the valuable. Axiological experience, along with the axiological thinking that derives from it, has one basic goal: to project an event that can cope with the emergence of the tragic. As such, axiological experience presupposes hope; it presupposes a feeling of power; it presupposes the existence of a “sense of reality” that reveals the values that can be realized here and now.

What meaning does all of this have for the problem of thinking posed earlier? Is thinking essentially a thinking in values, or are values something externally added on to thinking?

Here I shall propose two key theses. Thesis I: The agathological provides food for thought. Thesis II: The axiological awakens and guides inquiry. The first thesis is a condition of the second. Intellectual inquiry is possible only when we already have “food for thought.”

Thinking emerges as a search for an explanation of the mystery of the tragic, which the agathological horizon of encounter has set before us. Human tragedy, the model of every experiential tragedy, is the shifting conjunction of what — speaking generally — is good with what is evil, of what is valuable with what is able to destroy value. It is the conjunction of the noble with the threat of degradation, life with death, youth with the ravages of time, happiness with possible sorrow. The tragic in order to be tragic does not actually have to occur; the possibility of the tragic is already tragic. This extraordinary conjunction of value and that which is able to destroy value provides food for thought. Thinking is not awakened as a result of the simple sight of what is. It also does not arise as a result of the intuition that something is not, or that something is composed of being and nonbeing. Thinking is not a simple reflection of the state of things. The specific concern of thinking that rouses it from slumber is the “conjunction of properties” that characterize human tragedy. Hegel writes: “[Spirit] wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it.”⁶ What Hegel calls “the negative” I have here called “the tragic.” I think the term “the tragic” better reflects the essence of the phenomena with which we are dealing and that Hegel also has in mind. To encounter means to look the tragic in the face, to tarry with it, to try to understand it, get to know it, work it out. To encounter, however, also means the ability to back down from the encounter, to flee, to assume an attitude of aggression, to abandon thought. The power to withdraw from or to engage in an encounter is what makes us aware of our freedom. An encounter imposes nothing, especially thought; it only *provides food for thought*. Actual thinking both presupposes and testifies to freedom.

Why does the agathological provide food for thought? Whence comes the preferential rebellion of thinking? Or, more concretely, why do we find food for thought in the tragedy of Prometheus, Oedipus, or a soul banished to a cave of darkness? What aspect of the world is responsible for making being problematic (or mysterious)? In Plato’s illustration of the cave, we see this aspect clearly—it is the light of the Good. Without light, there would

⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977, 19.

56 be no darkness, and without the contrast between brightness and darkness there would be no basis for any questions. The light is something absolutely simple. It is also something that, although itself unseen, is what allows us to see, to distinguish, to question. But Plato's light is only a metaphor, a symbol, and we would prefer a more unequivocal answer. Many scholars say that this light is something ideal, or perhaps even an Idea. Let us not get into this debate, but focus instead on the simple fact of the basic phenomenon. Whether we say "light" or "Idea" or something else, the one thing we must constantly emphasize is the problematizing. The dimension of "illuminated ideality" makes a problem of everything we encounter or meet, as well as everything we may encounter or meet. This problematizing is a fundamental aspect of how ideality functions. Because of it, every event, every object, every being can become for us a problem, a mystery (I am disregarding here Marcel's distinction in this respect). Standing in the face of a problem, I ask in amazement: how is it possible? How is it possible for Prometheus to be punished? How is it possible for our freedom to be a restricted freedom? And, continuing on, how is it possible for the fullness of being that surrounds us to be an illusory fullness? How is it possible that no visible creature has attained the fullness of its existence, or, to put it another way, how is it possible for there to be a distinction between essence and existence? There resounds in these questions an echo of rebellion and amazement. Rebellion and amazement are the fundamental preference of the thinking that the agathological ideal of existence has awakened to life. Radical philosophical thinking, i.e., metaphysical thinking, does not arise from wonder in the face of the surrounding world, as the Aristotelians would have it, nor does it ask why there is something rather than nothing. Wonder is the sort of affirmation of being that brings thinking to an end. Radical philosophical thinking is a form of preferential rebellion against the tragedy of the world. This, however, is not a rebellion that seeks to abandon or destroy the world, but one whose primary aim is to understand the world.

Let us now briefly consider the second thesis: the axiological awakens and guides inquiry.

In the heart of thinking resides not only preferential rebellion but also preferential acceptance. Thinking as acceptance is thinking for the sake of the value of truth. It strives to distinguish truth from falsity. Truth is the ideal value of such thinking. In order to discern the truth of someone I encounter, in order to understand her, I must let her be. I must enter into dialogue with her, ask her what she thinks, and try to find answers to the questions she asks. If I immediately dismiss her, I will never understand her. Thinking arises directly from our ability to make sacrifices. In order to think, I must sacrifice something of myself. Sacrifice is something more than a fleeting act of consciousness; it is the very mode in which our good will manifests itself when we overcome aggression and the temptation to flee. But on whose behalf is this victory won? Simply on behalf of the ideal value of truth. Thinking on the axiological plane turns out to be the preference of truth over falsity.

What kind of truth is this? Again, without going into particulars, ⁵⁷ we will focus on what seems fundamental. The truth at issue here is certainly not truth in the sense of “the conformity of our judgment with the thing.” Encounter is the source of the experience of truth on a much more fundamental level than that of our relationship to things. Our relationship to things is mediated by dialogue with other human beings. Consequently, our original experiences of truth should be sought in our encounters with others, and not in our contact with things. What is the ideal of truth in this sphere? We said earlier that the ideal makes the world problematic for us. The true as ideal also makes it problematic. Because of such truth, there arises a distinction essential for an encounter to take place, and then for the whole process of communication between those involved in the encounter, namely, the distinction between human pretence, illusion, or phantom and the human face, or, to use a Greek expression, the other’s “icon.” The phantom is the person’s mask; the icon is his face. A person can mask his face, can assume a variety of poses, can pretend. This is the source of the key problem of encounter: the problem of the truth of the encounter. Where is the boundary between the mask and the face? To answer this question, we need to engage in dialogue. Dialogue not only dispels interpersonal delusions, but also opens the possibility for dispelling delusions about things. Dialogue gives birth to the idea of objectivism, and with this idea begins knowledge of the objective world. Truth conceived as a property of our judgments about things turns out to have a complex origin. If there were no encounters, there would also be no such truth.

Thinking on the axiological plane, thinking that prefers truth to the illusion of truth, is usually simply called seeking. Thinking as seeking is permeated with a special form of courage (bold thinking, as opposed to cowardly mindlessness), which restrains the impulse to flee from problems or to respond with impudent aggression to another’s tragedy. Such thinking is also intimately connected with hope. When we think, we have hope that — no matter what — we will eventually “think up” something, or at least “think through” something. Hence, axiological thinking is also projective thinking. It aims at discovering a plan to resolve the problem of the tragic. This point seems especially important. Whenever an encounter is coming to an end, the question arises: what next? This question is by no means accidental. Thinking that has been awakened to life by an encounter with the tragic cannot fall back to sleep before it has resolved the problem of the tragic. Otherwise it would betray its own essence. Of course, the possibility of betrayal is ever present. There are always so many things not fully thought through, but this happens against the nature of thinking. The nature of thinking is to project an event that is capable of overcoming the tragic.

Here we come to one of the final aspects of thinking as a thinking in values. We have already left behind our rebellion, our childish temptation to flee and our juvenile temptation to fight. We live in the hope of attaining

58 understanding. As our understanding grows, our creative imagination is busy devising the project of an event that can *hic et nunc* bring deliverance. Our whole attention is concentrated on bringing this project to fruition. As we can see from this, thinking in values is above all a thinking that has to do with events. It appears, then, that the original seat of values in the world is neither beings nor so-called valuable objects, but events. Heidegger perceived a deep metaphysical meaning in the concept of an event. An event contains the idea of a gift.⁷ What kind of gift? Whose gift? Whatever the gift and whoever the giver, one thing is always clear: the gift provides a way out of the tragic and is a sacrifice of self. Someone does not flee, does not destroy, but stops to think, and then lets be.

Thinking is a free response of the spirit to that which gives food for thought, as well as to that which enables and guides inquiry. There is nothing, however, more thought provoking than an encounter with another. In an encounter we attain a vivid sense of the tragedy of being. An encounter opens up the agathological and axiological horizon of existence. An encounter is an event, and, as such, it constitutes a certain *a posteriori*: it starts from experience. At the same time, however, an encounter is possible thanks to an ideal *a priori* that secretly governs the course of the encounter and is prior to it. The presence of this *a priori* disposes us to repeat encounters. No concrete encounter ever attains its full truth. Over each encounter broods the shadow of the possibility of separation. Would a mysterious fate be thus preparing us for the most authentic encounter of all? We know that philosophy provides us with many often mutually contradictory concepts of the ideal *a priori* that secretly governs our life and thought. Plato and St. Augustine probed deeply into the symbol of light. Descartes, and later Lévinas, focused on the dimension of infinity, which conditions all finite thought. These, however, are subsequent issues and theories, constructed upon the experience of problematizing. Let us not go into them. Let us simply allow encounter and problematizing to remain for us an event that arouses us from slumber and prompts us to seek.

Axiology and Crisis

Finally, let us return again to the motif of freedom. Let us ask: Is it necessary for us to encounter others? Could we not go through life without encounters? If we reflect upon the event of an encounter, we see clearly that an encounter does not happen of necessity. Although we do indeed encounter other people and God, all of this takes place as if by accident, by grace. The event of an encounter is a free gift of time, transcending anything we can expect or imagine. “The spirit breathes where it will.”

Thinking in values always brings with it a subtle experience of freedom. Freedom turns out to be the very value of thinking in values — the value that is attained because it is presupposed. Let us recall the

⁷ In Polish the word “gift” (*dar*) actually enters into the construction of the word “event” (*wydarzenie*), and this may be what Tischner is alluding to here. —Trans.

various stages of thinking in values and the relation of such thinking to freedom. We may question the hierarchical nature of the world. We may resign from preferring. We may do away with the sight of the tragic or flee from it. We may close ourselves off from the ideality that problematizes. We may avoid inquiring into the difference between the face and the mask, basking in the mask that suits us. We may, in the end, resign from reflecting on the project of an event that would bring some sort of salvation. We may resign from every form of sacrifice. None of these possibilities is at all theoretical. Not only science, but philosophy as well, seeks today for evidence of a coercive force that would relieve human beings of all freedom. But the flight from freedom itself testifies to freedom. Since freedom is everywhere, we must concede that thinking affirms itself when it affirms its freedom. This fact once again shows us the profound connection between thought and values. 59

The radical thinking that we are attempting to describe combines in itself the agathological and the axiological. Consequently, this thinking provides a basis not only for every science of what is, for ontology, but also for a possible politics. We must restore the word "politics" to its deepest meaning. Politics in the radical sense of the term is the science of projects, reasonable projects for sacrifices by human beings at this stage in history.

I referred at the beginning to the lively interest that axiology has aroused among us in recent years. Perhaps we have come a little closer to understanding the deepest sources of this interest. We are undoubtedly in a state of crisis. The crisis has reached the very foundation of our humanity: it has shaken our relationships with one another and with God. Our thinking tries to dispense with hierarchies and preferences. When in this situation we turn our interest to axiology, it is not in order to refute nihilism or to discover a plane for dialogue with those who think differently. At least, that is not our main concern. Our effort has both a metaphysical and a political intent, namely, to discover a fitting project for the sacrifices to which the tragic of our time calls people of good will.